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A. Hopkinson



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

FRANCIS HOPKINSON.

BY

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PHILADELPHIA:
COLLINS, PRINTER, 705 JAYNE STREET.
1878.



Francis Hopkinson

J. P. Tankersley Sculp.

FRANCIS HOPKINSON.

Thomas Hopkinson, the father of Francis Hopkinson, a gentleman of good family, was a native of London. He received a liberal education, and availing himself diligently of the advantages within his reach, became a man of fine scholarly attainments and of large and varied scientific knowledge. After completing his education he studied law, and on being admitted to the bar decided upon the rather unusual course, for men of his profession, of seeking a field for himself in the New World. In consequence he came at once to this country, where he arrived about 1731, certainly before November, 1732, when we find his name as counsel in an important suit before the Court of Chancery.¹ In September, 1736, he was married by the Rev. Dr. Jenney, Rector of Christ Church, to Miss Mary Johnson, the only daughter of Baldwin Johnson, by his wife Mary, widow of Col. William Dyer, of New Castle Co.

In 1741 he succeeded Andrew Hamilton as Judge of Vice-Admiralty for Pennsylvania, and some years later was called to a seat in the Provincial Council. While faithfully discharging his official duties he yet found time to seize upon many opportunities for showing his interest in the welfare of

¹ Rawle's Equity in Penna., Appendix, p. 33.

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his adopted country, especially in all that pertained to the advancement of science and education. He interested himself actively in the success of the newly-formed Library Company, and when the Junto developed into the American Philosophical Society in 1743 was chosen its first president. Dr. William Smith, in his "Account of the College and Academy of Philadelphia," refers to its formation as follows: "Many gentlemen of the first rank in the province gave their countenance to this design, and afterwards became Trustees for it; but those on whom the chief care of digesting and preparing matters rested, were—Thomas Hopkinson, Tench Francis, Richard Peters, and Benjamin Franklin, Esqs."

The active part which he took in these enterprises and his natural inclination towards scientific pursuits brought him into close friendship with Benjamin Franklin, who thus acknowledges one instance of the aid rendered him by Mr. Hopkinson: "The power of points to throw off the electric fire was first communicated to me by my ingenious friend Mr. Thomas Hopkinson, since deceased, whose virtues and integrity, in every situation of life, public and private, will ever make his memory dear to those who knew him, and knew how to value him." He was unfortunately cut off in the prime of life on the 5th of November, 1751, leaving his family to the care of his widow, who nobly discharged the trust.

Francis Hopkinson was born in Philadelphia on the 21st of September, O. S., or according to the present calendar the 2d of October, 1737.¹ His mother clearly discerning his talents determined that he should have the advantage of as liberal an education as the Province could afford, and accordingly placed him at the College and Academy of Philadelphia, the germ of the present University of Pennsylvania. Here he graduated in 1757, the Master's degree following in 1760.

After leaving college he began the study of law under Benjamin Chew, Attorney-General of the Province, and in 1761 was admitted to the Bar. In that year he was called upon

¹ The year of his birth is generally given 1738; this is not correct, as he was baptized at Christ Church, Nov. 12, 1737.

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to perform his first public service, in the capacity of Secretary to a conference, held on the banks of the Lehigh, between the Governor and the Indians of that region; his poem "The Treaty" was suggested by this event. In 1759 he accepted the position of Secretary of the Library Company, and from Feb. 1764, to May, 1765, fulfilled, as well, the duties of Librarian. He was also Secretary of the Vestry of Christ Church and St. Peters, and turned his talent for music to the benefit of the United Churches, by instructing the children of the two congregations in "the art of psalmody," receiving for his efforts in this direction the special thanks of the Vestry. These positions, with the practice of his profession, occupied a large portion of his time, yet he found leisure for the cultivation of Belles Lettres and the higher branches of science.

In October, 1765, he established himself for a brief period as a conveyancer, in an office at the corner of Market Street and Lætitia Court.

In the spring of the ensuing year an opportunity of gratifying his long-felt desire to visit England, presented itself. Mr. Redmond Conyngham, being about to return to his native land, where he had a considerable estate, offered Hopkinson a passage on board his ship, the "Hayfield," which was to convey himself and family to Ireland. They sailed from New Castle¹ on the 26th of May, and reached Londonderry on the 27th of June. Writing to his mother, on the 2d of July, he says:—

"It was remarkable that the night we left New Castle that .

¹ A few hours before his departure he received a copy of the resolutions passed by the Trustees of his Alma Mater, on the 20th of May. So marked an expression of esteem has hardly ever again issued from the same source, and, although published in the *National Portrait Gallery*, they must find a place here:—

"It was resolved that as Francis Hopkinson, Esq., who was the first scholar in this seminary at its opening, and likewise one of the first who received a degree, was about to embark for England, and has done honor to the place of his education by his abilities and good morals, as well as rendered it many substantial services on all public occasions, the thanks of this institution ought to be delivered to him in the most affectionate and respectful manner."

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A few days after entering Congress he writes to Dr. Coale, of Baltimore:—

“If my poor abilities can be of the least service to my country in her day of trial I shall not complain of the hardship of the task. . . . We are anxious but have lively hopes of success. Our troops are hearty and eager for action and full of spirits, animated I really believe by the spirit of patriotism. When men of fortune turn common soldiers to fight for their liberties against the hand of oppression, success, I think, must attend their honest efforts, the tool of tyrannic power must shrink from before them.”

At the recommendation of the Marine Committee, Congress, on the 18th of November, appointed him “to execute the business of the Navy under their direction.”¹

When the British found their movement on Philadelphia, through the Jerseys, to be a failure and began to draw in their lines, orders were issued to destroy the property of the most prominent Whigs; in Bordentown, among the houses burned was the Borden Mansion. It was spacious and elegantly furnished. The large French mirrors, the numerous articles of vertu and art scattered through the rooms were objects of admiration and wonder to visitors, as well as a matter of pride to the town. The old lady, Mrs. Borden, seated herself in a large chair placed on the opposite side of the street, and there witnessed the destruction of her home and its treasures. A British officer, struck by her appearance, came to her, and expressed his sympathy by saying that he had a venerated mother of his own of whom she reminded him, and therefore felt deeply grieved for the sad sight before them. Mrs. Borden replied, “This is the happiest day of my life, Sir.” “Indeed, Madam, how can that be?” “Because the very fact of your burning the chief houses convinces me that you find it impossible to conquer our people, or you would not so ruthlessly destroy such property.” Francis Hopkinson’s house was fired at the same time, but escaped in a very curious manner. Captain J. Ewald, one of the best known Hessian

¹ Journal of Congress, vol. ii., p. 462.

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officers engaged in the war, was in command of the detachment to which the British had committed the work of destruction, and happening to enter Hopkinson's library was amazed to find it filled with scientific apparatus, in addition to the books that lined its walls. Picking up a volume of Provost Smith's Discourses, he wrote in his mother-tongue, under the coat of arms, "This man was one of the greatest rebels, nevertheless, if we dare to conclude from the Library, and Mechanical and Mathematical instruments, he must have been a very learned man," and in recognizing the philosopher, he forgot the rebel and allowed the neighbors to extinguish the flames before any great damage had been done.

All through the war Hopkinson's fertile brain was busy devising arguments in prose and verse to strengthen and cheer the hearts of his countrymen,¹ and by the able discharge of his duties in the administration of naval affairs and as treasurer of loans he rendered special service to the good cause. And here we must quote Dr. Rush's opinion of the great importance of his public services as an author—"that the various causes which contributed to the establishment of the Independence and federal government of the United States, will not be fully traced, unless much is ascribed to the irresistible influence of the ridicule which he (Francis Hopkinson) poured forth, from time to time, upon the enemies of those great political events."

Whilst Hopkinson was at Bordentown, whither he had retired on the entry of the British into Philadelphia, he received the first intimation of his brother-in-law Dr. Duché's defection from the American cause. Enough has been said elsewhere of Duché's letter to Washington, and of Hopkinson's scathing rebuke to the recreant, but the following from Hopkinson to Washington has not, it is believed, been published:—

¹ The Battle of the Kegs, one of the best known of all the ballads of the Revolutionary period, was written in January, 1778, and instantly achieved a wide-spread popularity. Possessing just enough of the spirit of true poetry to please the mass, while the rather doggerel versification rendered it easy to recite, it presented the most ridiculous side of the subject in the wittiest possible manner.

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BORDEN TOWN, 14th Nov'r, 1777.

SIR:—

The Intimacy of my Connection with Mr. Duché renders all assurances unnecessary that the Letter addressed by him to your Excellency on the 8th of Oct. last gives me the greatest concern. I flatter myself some undue means have been tried to induce him to write such a Letter so incompatable with the amiable character he has ever maintained and so fatal to his Reputation. I could not forbear communicating some of my sentiments to him on the occasion. These I might probably have been able to convey to him by secret means, but did not chuse to incur the imputation of a clandestine correspondence. I have therefore taken the liberty to send the enclosed letter to you unsealed for your perusal. Resting it entirely on your judgement to cause it to [be] forwarded or not. I hope your Excellency will pardon my giving you the Trouble. The occasion is a very interesting one to me. My friendship for Mr. Duché calls upon me to do all I can to warn him against the fatal consequences of his ill advised step, that he may if possible do something to avert them before it is too late.

I am, Sir,

With the warmes wishes of my Heart for your welfare,
Your sincere friend & very humble servant,

F. H.

His Excellency GEN'L WASHINGTON.

The letter to Duché, however, seems not to have reached its destination, as a letter from Washington to Hopkinson, dated "Valley Forge, Jan. 27, 1778," concludes:—

"Having never found an opportunity of conveying the Letter which you sometime ago sent me for Mr. Duché, by such a channel as I thought would reach him, I return it to you again. The contents have not been made public."

In September, 1776, Governor Livingston appointed him Third Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey. From the first he was disinclined to accept the position, and so wrote to his colleague, John Hart, who replied:—

PRINCE TOWN, Sept 12th, 1776.

DEAR SIR:—

I have now before me your Favour of the 7th instant. I am sorry that you intend to Resign the appointment of such

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an important office as one of the Judges of the Supream Court of this State, at this critical crisus when the assistance of every Good man is wanted to add treuth to our New Constitution to which I Know you to be a stanch friend, notwithstanding yours to me is to be considered as a private letter, I thought the Publick so much Intrested in the affair that I could not Refrain Leting some of your and my Particular friends know some thing of your intention, they are no more at a Loss to guess than myselfe what is the Reason that you Dicline to accept. But as it is now out of our power to make any alteration they are Desirous that you will Please to Ree Considor the matter and are of oppinion with me that it is Best for you as well as the Publick to Take upon yourself the office, I wish it was in my power to have a personel Conferance with you on this important affair but as it is not at present, I must conclude with Leaving these few broken hints to your serious consideration and am with

Great Regard your Sincere friend
and Humble Servant,
JOHN HART.

Gordon¹ says he accepted the position and held it until President Reed offered him the Court of Admiralty in Pennsylvania, but this seems to rest on no other basis than the fact of his appointment in 1776, and during the three following years I can find no reference to his holding a judicial position, nor does Reed seem to have considered him as other than a citizen of Pennsylvania, holding an office under Congress.

A few days after the death of Judge Ross, Hopkinson received the following letter:—

DEAR SIR:—

Allow me to ask you whether the office of Judge of the Admiralty in succession to Mr. Ross will be consistent with your present Post under Congress, and otherwise agreeable. The Appointment is £500 per Ann. and £15 in every Cause, besides small Motions, &c.

You may write me in confidence, and believe me,
Sir, Your most Obd't & very Humble Ser't,

JOSEPH REED.

WALNUT STREET, July 14, 1779.

¹ History of New Jersey.

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The office alluded to by President Reed was that of Treasurer of the Continental Loan Office to which he had been appointed sometime previously. He at once accepted the Admiralty, and on the 16th of July, 1779,¹ was commissioned to the post which had years before been ably filled by his father. He presided over the Court until, under the Federal Constitution, Admiralty Jurisdiction became vested solely in the United States. On the organization of the General Government—in spite of a vigorous effort to secure the appointment of Edward Shippen, the last Judge of the Court of Admiralty under the Crown—Washington transferred him to the new Court, accompanying the commission with the following letter:—

UNITED STATES, September 30th, 1789.

SIR :—

I have the pleasure to enclose to you a commission as Judge of the United States for the District of Pennsylvania, to which office I have nominated, and, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, have appointed you.

In my nomination of Persons to fill offices in the Judicial Department, I have been guided by the importance of the object—considering it as of the first magnitude, and as the Pillar upon which our political fabric must rest. I have endeavored to bring into the high offices of its administration such characters as will give stability and dignity to our national Government,—and I persuade myself they will discover a due desire to promote the happiness of our Country by a ready acceptance of their several appointments.

The laws which have passed, relative to your office, accompany the commission.

I am, Sir, with very great esteem,
Your most obedient Servant,

GEO. WASHINGTON.

The honorable FRANCIS HOPKINSON, Esquire.

¹ This commission was without a tenure of office clause, and was superseded by another, dated April 6, 1780, by which seven years was fixed as the length of his term. A third commission was issued on the 6th of April, 1787, for a like period.

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His admiralty decisions exhibit the extent and breadth of his research, to which was added much astuteness in bringing to light a clear equity view of the cause upon which he gave judgment, and for this reason, the opinions of Judge Hopkinson the second are still held in high esteem by the profession.

Francis Hopkinson was an active participator in the debates of the convention of 1787, which formed the present Constitution of the United States. He threw his whole soul into the matter; his early and unwavering patriotism had long established him in the confidence of his countrymen, and at this important crisis he materially helped to bring about the adoption of the Constitution, not only by his able and statesman-like discussions, but also by producing a very timely work of humor in his best vein, published under the name of the "History of a New Roof." To this brochure the highest meed of praise was accorded, and men of great distinction at the time have left their testimony as to its influence on the public mind.

On Monday morning, May 9, 1791, he was suddenly struck down by an attack of apoplexy, which in two hours terminated his existence in the 54th year of his age.

His character is thus analyzed by Thomas I. Wharton, in his Notes on the Provincial Literature of Pennsylvania:—

"A poet, a wit, a patriot, a chemist, a mathematician, and a Judge of the Admiralty: his character was composed of a happy union of qualities and endowments, commonly supposed to be discordant; and with the humor of Swift and Rabelais, he was always on the side of virtue and social order."

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